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Difficult Subjects

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The Textiles, Clothing and Design Department in the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska has a graduate program that offers Masters of Arts and Master of Science degrees. Students have the choice of completing a thesis, project or coursework for their degree. Students who elect a project emphasis, notably in textile design and textile history/quilt studies department enroll in a graduate seminar called TXCD 873 Design Perspectives & Issues, which is described in the course bulletin as a:

Seminar [that] combines readings and discussion of contemporary issues in design with creative applications. The course culminates in an exhibition in the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery.

This course requires significant work from the students to prepare for the weekly discussion of assigned readings, participation in and analysis of cultural events and production of exhibition quality creative or curatorial work.

We offer this course in alternate fall semesters and each time we teach it the theme and the readings change according to a topic the faculty member teaching the course decides upon. Fall of 2005 marked the fourth time I taught the seminar and the sixth time we had offered it since its inception. The premise of developing the course was that students who do not engage in constructing a formal thesis need to have a forum for developing critical skills outside of the design studio similar to the research methods course required of students completing the thesis option. Because our department has a gallery dedicated to the exhibition of textile and apparel work, we felt it uniquely appropriate to devote a portion of the course to developing work for exhibition according to the theme of the seminar. Thus, we have been offering this seminar for 12 years, gradually increasing the credit hours earned from 1 credit to 3 credits as it became more and more clear how much work the students engaged in over the semester.

In previous years I have built the seminar around the following themes: Modernism and Feminist Art Theories with visiting artist Linda Anfuso; Collectors, Collections and the Object in which Barbara Layne of Concordia University participated as a guest contributor to the course delivery; and Community Based Art in which visiting artist from Warsaw, Maria Tyniec, collaborated with graduate students, elementary school children and youth from the local Indian Center after school group to create the final gallery installation.

The 2005 seminar theme was craft: craft history, craft in a cultural context and craft makers. The readings for the course examined the historical role of craft and how the meaning of craft has changed over time. I hoped the students and I would gain insight to the art/craft debate and examine new ways of considering the similarities and differences between them. With the readings as a foundation, we discussed the role of institutions, such as the museum space and the art/craft journal in framing this debate. We considered the relationship of the maker to the object and the object as an entity that exists in the world apart from the maker. We examined the relationship between craft and culture and how some practitioners of craft use their making of objects to connect to larger current issues.

The idea for “Difficult Subjects” became the theme for the exhibition, because I wanted students to explore meaning, just as the 3 artists who agreed to participate in the exhibition with us. This grew out of a conversation I had with tapestry weaver Michael Rohde when I met him at SOFA in the fall of 2004. He had recently completed the weaving that he contributed to the exhibition and told me it was the first time he made an artwork that was not just elegantly designed, but also grappled with a contemporary issue of grave concern: the US invasion of Iraq.

In the syllabus I asked why study craft at this time? I said, as an artist and designer who works in a traditional craft medium—weaving—I am interested in craft to understand how I fit into a larger context. For me, this context includes the art world as well as the social, political and economic environment in which I live. The literature I selected to read in this seminar had been published over the past 9 years and I felt added fresh ideas and historical context to the conversation.

The 3 required texts were:

- *The Culture of Craft (Studies in Design and Material Culture)* by Peter Dormer, 1997.
- *Artists In Times of War and Other Essays (Open Media)* by Howard Zinn.
- *Craft and Contemporary Theory* by Sue Rowley, 1997.

These were supplemented by chapter readings and interviews included in packet:

- Brenson, Michael. *Acts of Engagement: Writings on Art, Criticism, and Institutions, 1993-2002*. Chapter 16, Magdalena Abakanowicz’s War Games: Monumental Horizontality, pp. 245-56.
- Duncan, Carol. *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in the Critical Art History*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Chapter 11, “Who Rules the Art World,” pp. 169-88.
- *Fiberarts*. “The Creative Critique. Interviews by Sunita Patterson. Four Experts Share Their Methods for Organizing and Getting the Most from Critiques,” April/May 2005.

This class met once a week for two hours, each week students prepared a written summary and reflection on the chapter reading(s) for the week. The students had several opportunities to interact with visiting artists whose work was on display in the gallery. These artists were: Nancy Koenigsberg and Lewis Knauss, who visited campus 5 weeks into the semester and Barbara Lee Smith, whose visit was in November. We also had phone conversations with the exhibiting artists for which the class prepared interview questions and shared their creative concepts. These interactions with the artists along with the in-class preparation we did in connection with their work in the gallery proved to be pivotal for the students in developing their exhibition work. In addition, we attended a lecture by Glen Brown, who was the keynote speaker for The Art of Fine Craft Conference, sponsored by the University Place Art Center, Lincoln, in mid October.

The personalities and background of students in this seminar varied from new college graduates to returning students who had previous professional experience, some in related fields and others seeking a career change. The class had a total of nine students, all white women. Three of the students are planning to complete creative work as part of their degree program, three students are planning to curate an exhibition as part of their Textile History/Quilt Studies project, one has chosen the thesis option and plans to work with film images of Latin American women from the 1940’s, one is a non-degree seeking student with an interest in design, and one is working on her Ph.D., coming from an art history background. Two students have since left the program without earning a degree (one in the design area and one in the TH/QS).

Because I knew I would have an academically diverse group of students and could not depend on each of them wishing to create an artwork for the exhibition, I expected some students to opt for a curatorial direction for their contribution to the culminating exhibition. Following an in-class written and drawing exercise, each student chose to make a new piece.

Visiting artists Lewis Knauss and Nancy Koenigsberg met with us for our 4th class session. Prior to their visit, we spent part of class in the gallery studying, sketching and discussing their artwork and identifying potential subjects for their own creative work. This exercise consisted of 3 parts, beginning with written reflection on 3 topics they felt passionately about and they consider are “difficult subjects” and listing of 1-3 points from the reading they felt strongly about. For part 2, they followed this writing with a visit to the gallery, which is located just down the hall to study the work of Knauss and Koenigsberg and then selected one object to examine more closely, recording with notes and sketches its form and structure, searching for the essential features of the piece. I then asked them to write a paragraph about how this artist uses formal elements such: color, line, shape, form, texture, structure, materials, and weight in a way that is of interest to you that suggests something that you could incorporate in the way you work.

Finally, in part 3, their job was to revisit the themes they had identified as difficult subjects and somehow link their selected subject with ideas they had identified with the reading. The last step of this exercise was to consider how they could integrate all the pieces to begin to design a piece of creative work that is both visually considered and connected to a theme you feel passionately about.

The exhibition is archived on the web site of the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery at <http://textilegallery.unl.edu/archives/2005/student873>. Web visitors can click on each artist’s name to see and image of her final work and read her statement about her project. Names of the student artists and their work follow: Tina Koeppe, “The Theater of War: Olympia and ‘Merica’”; Christina Brooks, “The History Lesson”; Jessica Chillemi, “Working Woman’s ‘Power Suit’”; Kim Madsen, “23 Cents”; Megan Myers, “Journey One Stitch at a Time”; Stacey Skold, “Would it change the way you sit down to dinner?”; Sabrina Stapp, “Expectations”; and Kate Sydik, “Reflections in the Snow”. In addition to the student work we exhibited the work of three invited artists, with whom the students conversed over the phone during the semester: Gyöngy Laky, “Wake,” 2000; Jon Eric Riis, “Triad,” 2004; and Michael Rohde, “From My House to Your Homeland,” 2003, also illustrated on the web archive.

Two students, both quilters, said this course provided a new way to think about making art, crafted objects, and quilts. The creative project forced them to move out of their comfort zone and “think outside of the box”. They said, “I never did anything with meaning, never used a sketchbook.” While neither has had time to make anything since the class, they said in the future, they would sketch it out and would not be afraid to include meaning.

One student describes her creative process changing in the following way:

Personally, the exercise relating to our final project inspired a major shift in my painting. Not only do I consider the content much more specifically, but also I became much more liberated regarding my technique adding collage elements and hand stitching to the canvas.

I love that my art now incorporates "craft" elements (if that is the appropriate way to describe it) blurring the lines further.

When discussing how the readings and class discussions about art versus craft, one student commented: it made me more aware of the discussions surrounding art and craft, helped to develop opinions about it and provided a lens to think about new experiences.

In an excerpt from another student's reflection on readings, "The History of Craft" by Paul Greenhalgh, she wrote:

The definition of 'craft' has been demoted to the point where many artisans consider it an insult. To call something a 'craft' appears to relegate it to the world of popsicle stick Christmas tree ornaments and projects made by children at summer camps. It's interesting to me how quickly the word "craft" has plunged from its respected status at the beginning of the 20th century (during the arts and crafts movement) to a word that is marginalized. To reclaim the word 'craft,' it will be necessary to raise the esteem of craft in the public eye. Just as local food producers are raising consciousness for organic and locally grown food, craftspeople and their supporters need to wage a campaign to re-educate the public about the environmental and social benefits of making and using decorative, useful objects that are made by hand.

Conclusions

In considering what students have said to me now that a year has elapsed since they participated in this class I learned how important it was for them to consider how a maker imbues an object with meaning. In the voice of one student, "It really made me think about my art, myself as an artist, and what I wanted to my work to say about me."

Another student was more specific about how the creative project influenced her work:

Personally, the exercise relating to our final project inspired a major shift in my painting. Not only do I consider the content more specifically, but also I became much more liberated regarding my technique adding collage elements and hand stitching to the canvas. I love that my art now incorporates "craft" elements (if that is the appropriate way to describe it) blurring the lines further. I also found it very interesting to learn about the meditative qualities of craft.

In conclusion, while the creation of meaning has been an important part of my own process in creating work, I learned that:

Finding meaning in making is not necessarily a conventional strategy for either professional or student artists.

Engagement in a process to create work that carries personal resonance can make a difference to how students think about both their own art and art they view.

Challenging discussions about art/craft making have a direct impact on how the makers think about their own creative process.